

## NANCY FRASER: AN INTERSECTIONAL CRITIC TO CONTEMPORARY CAPITALISM

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### ABSTRACT

Since the 16th century capitalism has been a many-headed Hydra that tends to become stronger over time. There have been many movements of dissent opposing a structure protecting private owners for greedy profit. However, this economical system tends to transmute and find more sophisticated operational ways. We cut off one head and two more grow back. How does capitalism operate in our current societies? Is neoliberalism a new version of this powerful hydra? Are we entering a new era ruled by techno-feudalism? Under which parameters of critique can we make a vigorous diagnosis and define justice? This essay presents and discusses the philosophical and political theory by Nancy Fraser in the context of global economies ruled by capitalism. This essay intends to vivisect this economic order by applying the functionalist, moral, ethical and normative critiques suggested in Fraser's political and philosophical theory. Specifically, this essay considers the relevant concepts of recognition, distribution & gender justice.

**Key words:** Nancy Fraser, Capitalism, Philosophy, Critical Theory, Gender, Justice.

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Before we enter a long and complex philosophical and political analysis it is fundamental to point out, particularly for those based in Germany, that Nancy Fraser is not Nancy Fraeser from the German Social Democratic Party serving as Federal Minister of the Interior and Community in Chancellor Olaf Scholz's cabinet since 2021. This distinction is fundamental because this essay has nothing to do with the political position of a politician in service but rather with a long and serious research of a very important contemporary philosopher with an extensive academic research.

### **NANCY FRASER**

Born in Baltimore, Maryland, in the United States, Nancy Fraser has a long academic background producing very extensive analyses in the fields of philosophy and politics. Her importance lies in her complex and deep understanding about how capitalism operates and how it evolves. Fraser is a contemporary thinker who follows the school of critical theory and feminism. She has had strong debates with other academic colleagues who represent contemporary critical thought such as Judith Butler from the US-American context and Axel Honneth in the German one. Even though there are shared angles for academic analysis and research, there are also disagreements which have made every exchange extremely relevant. Nancy Fraser has always been open for discussion, criticism and response.

By examining the historical and theoretical influence on Fraser's thought, we see the German philosopher and economist Karl Marx who formulated one of the deepest critiques on capitalism unveiling serious dynamics of injustice, hierarchical structures and power dynamics that create operational co-dependency.

The Communist Manifesto and *Das Kapital* are the main works for which Marx literally died for. Many might revolt by hearing Marxism after the historical development later on in the East Block. However, Marx is not producing a theory of communism as ideology. Karl Marx remains one of the most eloquent critics from a philosopher and economist ever made to our economic system. In this sense, Karl Marx became dangerous and has influenced many academics for a century, such as Nancy Fraser.

Marx became important among intellectuals and academics who continue evaluating how capitalist societies function and how oppression operates. There has been criticism and evolution in Marxist theory. One of the most relevant post-Marxist criticisms is the German *Frankfurter Schule* who brought new elements to the old Marxist discourse including a strong sociologist perspective to determine how oppression takes place in capitalist societies and how strong actually capitalism is. The German Frankfurt School was very innovative and very sharp on its analysis. They influenced social movements after the second World War in countries like the United States and, of course, the movements in European context in the sixties and seventies. Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Benjamin and others were the post-Marxist school who gave a new perspective to Karl Marx's original analysis. They developed a strong *critical theory* towards capitalism, fascism & even to communism and its Marxist-Leninist narrative, which was not Marx's analysis itself but a distorted interpretation which became a toxic ideology. The *Frankfurter Schule* operated from the Weimar Republik (1918-1938) in Germany until many decades after World War II. Their research saw many historical breakthroughs, therefore their diagnosis and critical angle became a must for political theory and emancipation.

Nancy Fraser came some generations after the German Frankfurt School but in the context of the United States. She and Axel Honneth are the philosophical continuum of a post-Marxist school related to the *Frankfurter Schule* from Germany. These are some of the main connections we need to historically and theoretically know in order to understand from which angle Nancy Fraser makes her contemporary critical analysis.

It is also relevant for us to know that Fraser has a philosophical and academic background. She operates mainly among academics and left-wing circles. She does not belong to any political party and her research is fundamentally philosophical, political, economic and social. She does also operate within universities where she has been discussing neoliberalism, new forms of oppression, distribution and recognition. Fraser's analysis is, to a great degree, intersectional and therefore very complex. She vivisects capitalism on different levels and connects the theoretical dots like a thoughtful spider. Once we contextualise, we can then move to her philosophical and political theory.

### **CRITICAL THEORY AS METODOLOGY**

When we attempt to vivisect an economical system and its operational ways and dysfunctionalities we have to clarify precisely from which angle and epistemology we are presenting an analysis and evaluation. Defining a clear angle elucidates if we are talking from a academic perspective, a political party perspective, a neoliberal perspective, a conservative perspective, a critical theory perspective, a feminist perspective

and so on. We can also make a critique from an intersectional angle bringing different perspectives together to offer a more complex and deep evaluation. When we start pointing out how capitalism operates, we need to first establish from which school of thought or political interest we are talking from. Clarifying the methodology is the very first premise for criticism. A critical analysis of capitalism looks extremely different from a far-right angle than from a left-wing one.(1) A philosophical analysis is different from a merely financial one. This differentiation has to be clear on our critical endeavours and when we research as well.

Nancy Fraser gives a critique to capitalism from the specific apex known as critical theory which is based on post-Marxism and the Frankfurt School. Her main focus is the study of justice in contemporary capitalist societies. In her research we find a strong evaluation looking at how injustice operates and how we can build a society in which justice can exist. What is also relevant in her theoretical endeavours is the meaning of emancipatory agency as well as gender justice. She analyses capitalism finding how this economical system evolves, mutates and develops new structures of power and oppression. One of the fundamental grounds for her evaluations are emancipatory movements and how capitalism oppresses ideologically, ontologically and even epistemologically. This is an important reason why she is open for dialogue with new generations. Fraser has always understood that capitalism is a sophisticated system that uses all its tentacles to shoot down justice. She clearly defines her position, the meaning of justice in her view and, at the same time, reminds open for debate.

(1) Hitler criticized globalization and neoliberalism. His criticism might sound appealing but his political goals were antidemocratic and hegemonic. We always need to put attention on who and why is making a critique. There are very conservatives corners also formulating criticism but from a very problematic angle and with very muddy intentionality.

## THE THREE LEVELS OF CRITIQUE

The standards from which Fraser navigates her own critical social theory move around three strategies of critique: the functionalist critique, a moral critique and an ethical critique. In addition, Fraser values the importance of redistribution as well as recognition and, most importantly, she embraces a strong emancipatory aim with a feminist perspective which gives her an incredibly importance in the terrain of critical theory and gender justice (2). For Fraser we can not talk of a serious and forceful critique towards capitalism without fundamental concepts such as emancipation, gender & justice.

The functionalist critique evaluates capitalism as an economy and focuses on its operational and dysfunctional structures. How does capitalism operate as an economy? What is capital, production, labour, finance, commodification, consumerism, alienation, social surplus, accumulation, commercial interests, self-regulation, austerity, deficit reduction, economic policies, free-markets and neoliberalism? Which consequences bring economical and political decisions towards the people? Why does the price of oil directly affect the workers' pockets? Why is the dollar value so relevant? Why are free-markets the new level of human exploitation in global economies? Why can a war between hegemonies unleash new strong class divisions, poverty and harsh violence? Why are women and children the most oppressed under capitalism? How does this system make certain groups richer and millions in extreme poverty? How do Northern economies destroy those from the South? Are all these operations accidental or a consequence of capitalist structures?

What is globalisation and the the neoliberal turn? Why does identity politics fit so well to a neoliberal context? Is capitalism only an economy or does it also operate ideologically? Can capitalism be moral and democratic? Can justice exists within capitalism and if so, how can we accomplish this objective? What is the importance of a welfare state? Which countries are leading more democratic approach? Is capitalism our best option at present times and in the near future? Is capitalism the only way? These are some of the questions which a functional critique focuses on in its theoretical endeavours and Fraser takes all of them into account.

In the political and social theory of Nancy Fraser we are asked to embrace by all means a functional critique. In fact, she does a constant evaluation in this terrain because capitalism mutates again and again. One of the main strengths from this system today is precisely to conceal very well its hegemonic dynamics but, most importantly, to block almost completely social and political agency. Ideologically, it uses new technological mechanisms to install itself as a no way out economy. We are pushed to believe these structures can be eventually questioned but not defeated. This is a characteristic implicit in neoliberalism.

Our contemporary societies are not the societies from industrial capitalism where the main actors of social agency were factory workers and labour unions. Today it is almost impossible to organize unions run by workers for their rights. However, there are some random exceptions, such as the recent case in New York City, where a Black Amazon worker managed to create a worker's union after being targeted and fired but keeping

2 Coming from an older generation Nancy Fraser has inspired criticism amongst some feminists and the post-gender politics school. It is fundamental to read her critique knowing that she is not queerphobic neither she denies the importance of identity politics. Nevertheless, she makes a sharp critique of identity politics and White privilege feminism. She defends the importance of gender justice and solidarizes with post-gender struggles.

3 Fraser, Nancy, and Rahel Jaeggi. Capitalism : A Conversation in Critical Theory, Polity Press, 2018.

the battle going with a friend. What this case brought to light recently is how many billions corporations such as Amazon spent in order to control any kind of emancipatory agency. Jeff Bezos, a multi-billionaire owning 183.6 billion USD (2022, *Forbes*), prefers to invest in workers' oppression networks than in paying decent wages and giving humane working rights. This example is not a single case but a broader and serious worldwide phenomena in the structural dynamics of globalisation and neoliberal free-markets.

An important factor in our evaluations need to acknowledge that we are not in the context of revolutionary action via student or cultural movements like in the sixties or seventies where it was very clear who was the oppressor and who the subject for emancipation. We had mass movements united against war, exploitation, racism and capitalism. Millions united and supported unions fighting for justice and peace. This is not our context today. Fraser argues that we live in neoliberalism with a strong emancipatory crisis. The new challenges we face are structural and economical, but also technological and ideological. We are at a new face of predatory capitalism.

When we evaluate contemporary capitalist societies we will realise that this hegemonic system operates in such ways that it turns nature and humans into commodities. Natural resources and human labour become mere objects of consumption and purchase. The relations between markets, subjects and the natural world are exploitative and the consequences of these relations are devastating for all of us. From climate change and the extermination of indigenous populations to global poverty, gender-based exploitation and class division producing strong social tensions worldwide, capitalism produces structures of emotionless domination and invisible coercion that make specific modes of exploitation possible.

This is how capitalism functions: it produces inequality, injustice and toxic relations via commodification, marketization and all the economical, ideological and social structures that perpetrate a surplus.

4 Fraser, Nancy. *A Triple Movement?*. (ed. London New Left Review Ltd., 2013), p.124

Such is the intrinsic logic behind this hegemonic system. In addition, capitalism has been evolving into a new global form known as neoliberalism. This new form allows individuals and little groups in the shape of corporations to produce wealth operating in different countries where production costs are low or the where they find state nations that do not regulate their market endeavours. Fraser describes this new face of capitalism as the neoliberal turn with the following words:

"In the current conjuncture, capital prefers, when possible, to bypass the risky business of production. Simplifying the circuit of accumulation, investors find profit in the buying and selling of money and of new financial products that commodify risk -thereby avoiding dependence on labour, whose role is in any case further reduced by new technologies. Necessarily, then, labour lacks the leverage it had in the 1930s. Manufacturing decamps to semi-periphery, union membership plummets, and the strike weapon loses much of its force -at least in the Global North. Equally important, the class division between labour and capital ceases to appear self-evident, becoming obfuscated by the seemingly more salient divide between the thinning ranks of the stably employed, on the one hand, and the swelling precariat on the other. (4)

This new type of capitalism contain some main characteristics. In neoliberalism, capitalism is reduced to finance and its main goal is to sustain free-markets in a global context. This means that expansive corporations and banks worldwide located become some kind of an abstract entity.

Corporations stretch within global economies in many different nation states that authorize free-markets in the form of trade agreements. These agreements allow them to operate freely without regulations which facilitate immense amounts of accumulation and wealth without any responsibility towards the territories they basically exploit. Corporations normally promise new jobs in the region in exchange for free-markets.<sup>(5)</sup> This new operational model has become extremely difficult to oppose because the oligarchs behind neoliberal economies are almost impossible to identify, or have local permissions that protect them from public mobilisation and persecution. The individuals behind a corporation normally sit quite far away enjoying their accumulation growing and growing. Millions per second. A new dangerous way of exploitation is at our door.

Another characteristic is how difficult it becomes to organize emancipation for justice in neoliberal societies. On the one hand, the roots of injustice become more abstract and untrackable, and on the other, the ideological element is using new technologies such as online social media that promotes division, alienation and, even worse, the idea about emancipation as something almost obsolete. New ideological mechanisms of social control such as Facebook, Instagram, Google and YouTube create strong online addiction, make people depressed and help to internalize strongly unhappiness, social resentments and consumerism. An unhappy subject is the perfect consumer. We see how recently during a global pandemic the levels of social mental health and the profit for corporations such as Amazon have increased enormously. And so has the global suicidal rate. Consequently, the problems we face today are not only economic.

Fraser argues in this respect a relevant angle coming from the critical theory school of thought. In her own words:

"If we treat capitalism as a form of economic organization, and if we assume that we already know what an economy is and what it's "for," then we might persuade ourselves that we need only invoke that "economic function" as the indisputable standard by which to evaluate it. But this would be self-deluding, even apart from the fact that capitalism is much more than "an economy."<sup>(6)</sup>

Nancy Fraser talks about an economic and financial crisis today but also about an ecological crisis, social crisis, political crisis and the crisis of emancipation. As a result, we need to evaluate capitalism not only as a mere economy where concepts like market, flow, growth, social surplus and production are the centre of analysis but to take into account other levels of evaluation and critique. Such an expanded evaluation is not reductionist because it does not only focus on functional concepts from the economy but it rather vivisects social, political and moral levels of evaluation. This is why she insists on expanding our analysis to the complexed levels suggested by critical theory. Such a critique does not only evaluate functionality but also morality, normativity and the ethical aspects within capitalism. Moreover, we can also point out its social legitimacy. It is well known that capitalism is not very popular among many people worldwide today. Millions of folks understand that this system is based on unfair social structures.

5 The case of the North American Free Trade (NAFTA) between Mexico, Canada and the USA is a good example of neoliberal economies today. Canada and the US promised Mexico thousands of new jobs in exchange for free markets and cheap labor. The consequences of this trade have been disastrous in many different levels including the exploitation of natural resources as well as the extermination of native people. In Germany, we had recently Elon Musk with the same modus operandi: promising jobs at the costs of environmental resources - in this case, water from the German ecosystem.

6 Fraser, Nancy, and Rahel Jaeggi. *Capitalism : A Conversation in Critical Theory*, Polity Press, 2018.

Capitalism operates by creating hierarchies and divisions. It is not only problematic in its functionality on the economic and political level but it is also morally unacceptable.

In the specific terrain of a moral critique there is also a fundamental evaluation. Capitalism turns humans and the animal kingdom into objects. Everything becomes something that has a price and can always be bought. This is how we all supposed to live and perceive others: as mere commodity. Work, time, bodies, beauty, youth, etc. We can all put it for sale and profit. Neoliberalism tells us that we not only can but that we actually should. Many people are selling whatever they can sell in order to survive. Labour in the form of time or sex are good examples. In urban contexts today more and more young people find sex work much more profitable than working at a corporation or doing any kind of precarious jobs.<sup>(7)</sup> Those who do not choose this route are encouraged to work hard as employees or entrepreneurs with almost nothing granted. With a lack of workers unions generalizing and less fair welfare states more and more people are also becoming homeless. Not because they are lazy, as neoliberals tend to wash their hands saying, but because the economical and social violence is structural. Success is measured today mainly by profit and accumulation. The more poor a human being is, the less support, visibility and respect they get.<sup>(8)</sup> A homeless person is perceived as a social failure and as a person who is not smart enough to make money. Neoliberalism spreads strongly the idea that the poor and vulnerable are that way because they want to be, not because there are hegemonic and oligarchic structures producing them.

7 Sex workers operate in very different ways depending on race, age and context. Some can reach unbelievable amounts of money. However, not all sex workers reach this scenario. Millions are forced to do sex work earning only what is necessary to survive. There are also some sex workers who have created their own unions and strong networks for sex work and justice. Sex work is a colorful terrain. Instead of moralizing we should support their struggle as workers.

8 This is happening in a distinctive manner in big cities in countries such as Australia, Canada, The US, England or even Germany where strong class divisions are increasing again. The number of homeless people is growing worldwide. With this complexed current war in East Europe a new wave of global poverty has just begun. Homelessness today is a result of war, displacement and structural violence caused by Imperialism & neoliberalism.

9 Fraser, Nancy, and Rahel Jaeggi. *Capitalism : A Conversation in Critical Theory*, Polity Press, 2018.

The systematic social shame towards the poor belongs to the moral critique in which we observe how fundamental basic human rights are constantly violated. A neoliberal ideology based on total hatred and disdain against the poor should be exposed as morally inadmissible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Another evaluation from the moral critique takes into account the old Marxist concept of alienation. This concept was developed during capitalist industrialisation when factory workers used to work inhumane schedules in terrible working and living conditions. Karl Marx saw the deep suffering of thousands of people at that time. We know that alienated labour creates a dreadful life because subjects are divided from themselves, from nature, from their fellow producers and from the product of their labour. In Fraser's words: "**Capital becomes the subject, and they become its servants, even though it is they who have created capital.**"<sup>(9)</sup> This capital is the tyrant ruler dictating the life and death of its subjugated objects: us humans. As a consequence, we see strong structures and networks of injustice spreading everywhere. The best examples are human and animal rights. If we perceive animals and nature as mere objects of consumption we break completely the natural cycle, thus creating extinction, climate change and dystopian realities. We have basically exploited natural resources in such unethical and irresponsible ways so far that even Native people warn us of a very destructive future coming. We can not take from nature and sell at global markets without creating a very dangerous global environmental disbalance.

We can also formulate a strong ethical-structural critique in which we expose how capitalism divest people from the capacity to design the modes of living they want. Our way of life is limited and predetermined following financial markets and exploitative relations. Capitalism blocks most of the population from having a fulfilling and abundant life. Furthermore, we are programmed by capitalist structures and its ideological machinery to operate in this world without ethical commitment and solidarity with the working class. We are impel to be as predatory as the system is.

A very worrying aspect under the current form of capitalism is to see how critical movements are dancing today with neoliberalism. The new feminist movements, for example, are forgetting fundamental concepts such as class struggle, race and intersectionality. Nancy Fraser, coming from the old Marxist school and critical theory, sees very clearly how even Feminism is getting weak in its critical narratives. The problem of recognition and identity politics are becoming the only trend in neoliberal contexts reducing the problem of distribution to the terrain of meritocracy.(10)

Another example are the ecological movements where Fraser also sees strong neoliberal tendencies. The protection and fight for mother nature becomes more and more a trend for those who can afford and inaccessible for those living in precarity. Biological products in urban contexts are expensive and hype. Instead of fighting the roots of natural exploitation we tend to wash our hands with bio-markets where only a certain class can join transformation. Here we see once again how capitalism as neoliberalism promotes hatred against the poor spreading the wrong idea about the poor as not good for the planet since they do not take the ecological measures needed for less

ecological damage. Bio-products have become a moral symbol of doing the right thing for the world while denying, at the same time, class struggles and structural violence towards those who can not afford the trend. In addition, many people involved in Green Parties are rich people and often the change they approach is a mere moral façade since they do oppose the true root of the problem.

Nancy Fraser describes how the neoliberal turn affects current social movements and ethical values with the following words:

*"The progressive-neoliberal bloc combined an expropriative, plutocratic economic program with a liberal-meritocratic politics of recognition. The distribution component of this amalgam was neoliberal. Determined to unshackle market forces from the heavy hand of the state and the millstone of "tax and spend", the classes that led this bloc aimed to liberalize and globalize the capitalist economy. What that meant, in reality, was financialization: dismantling barriers to, and protections from, the free movement of capital; deregulating banking and ballooning predatory debt; deindustrializing; weakening unions; and spreading precarious, badly paid work. Popularly associated with Ronald Reagan but substantially implemented and consolidated by Bill Clinton, these policies hollowed out working-class and middle-class living standards while transferring wealth and value upward – chiefly to the 1 percent, of course, but also to the upper reaches of the professional-managerial classes."(11)*

10 Many talk today about feminism in the mainstream spheres as if it only meant to be rich, successful and accepted among privileged circles and nothing else. And it gets even scarier when we see this successful rich women promoting a very neoliberal version of feminism via social media to millions of young girls. This new wave of feminism tell us the story of women who made their way into networks of power and privilege via merit. Successful women in neoliberal economies do not speak about structural violence nor about supporting working class women. They only represent and speak to those that can be like them and ignore millions who do not have a chance at all in the neoliberal game.

11 Fraser, Nancy. *The Old Is Dying and The New Cannot Be Born. From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond.* Verso, 2019.

At the level of a normative critique, we see a very complex and extensive research. Here Fraser studies carefully the welfare state as the entity responsible for the well-being of all its citizens, and how both recognition and distribution can take place and under which premises. As a post-Marxist feminist, she asserts the normative demands a nation-state has to follow in order to reach social justice in capitalist societies. These demands are conceived and defined at mainly three levels: the political, the domestic and the economic.

Fraser asserts a normative model for welfare states that follows the idea of gender justice comprised of seven normative principles: the anti-poverty principle, the anti-exploitation principle, the three equality principles (income equality, leisure-time equality, equality of respect), the anti-marginalization principle and the anti-androcentrism principle.(11) This is a very complex model that can operate under capitalism if the conditions are given. She sees nation-states with a strong political and ethical maturity that regulate banks, corporations, capital flow and free-market economies as well as strong and social orientated networks operating within as possible. The problem of our neoliberal societies today is that nation-states are losing power and that they are becoming not the rulers but the slaves of financialization so that ethical, social, economic and political boundaries are getting lost. We are losing the power of regulation and the 1 percent are ruling all of us with a strong force. This is a condition that we need to overcome if we want true change. This is the key problem of today. If we keep on losing in this terrain neoliberalism will be turning more and more into techno-feudalism.(12) The expanded crisis of today is a result of capitalism operating in anti-social and immoral ways.

At this point we should acknowledge the very last and relevant theoretical moment in Fraser's analysis and evaluation: she states that capitalism is not utterly evil but rather as extremely toxic in its current form. There are other normative models that can work under such a system. Furthermore, we can create concrete proposals based on an extensive evaluation that can turn capitalism as we know it into a system where everyone can gain from. Not only on the economical level but in the micro and macro political and social levels including justice for women, post-gender subjects, people of color, the working class, the animal kingdom and nature. How can this take place? Fraser answers with certainty that this is only possible via welfare states that follow a clear progressive normative model based on her extensive seven specific principles for gender justice.(13) This model can only be achieved if we evaluate with all the angles of critique suggested by critical theory.

11 Fraser, Nancy. *Fortunes Of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. Verso, 2013.

12 We need to put attention and see which countries are trying the most progressive models and push towards what is working at best. Some of the countries operating today with such tendencies are Scandinavian nations where progressive capitalism with a solid social justice as focus is taking place.

13 The welfare state is where recognition and distribution are granted as well as human rights, workers rights, animal rights, and the regulation of oligarchs and corporations.

## CONCLUSION

Capitalism is a system that evolves and becomes stronger with time. Its current operational ways create strong waves of injustice & social tensions. The advantages of the 1% over millions of human beings are immoral and unjustified. Fraser's evaluations are very valid arguments. The difference between new generations of feminists and Nancy Fraser lies fundamentally in how deep she goes into formulating a complexed critique to capitalism evaluating from a critical theory angle including the structural, the moral, the ethical and the normative critiques. She does not only criticize, but has the intellectual and academic courage to present a concrete alternative of a normative model that can change the scenario we are immerse in. She asserts after a long process of academic research how some parameters of critique are crystal clear for many. However, evaluating capitalism from a deeper level of understanding which unveils its structural mechanisms and institutional arrangements that sustain it is a level that is not crystal clear for most of us, including those active in critical movements today. In fact, Fraser warn us, this is where the danger takes place in neoliberal societies and where critical theory becomes fundamental. A reductionist critic staying at only one level of evaluation is unsatisfactory. Our angle must be intersectional. The premise Fraser defends for transformation lies on fighting for welfare states that follow her seven principles for justice. A critique Fraser might face to her evaluation is that her model only works within capitalism and does not suggest a new system but rather defends the idea that we can change capitalism from within.